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## Changing Campustown

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# ***CHANGING CAMPUSTOWN***

**There's been a push to redevelop Campustown for years. Now the city of Ames, Iowa State University, and LANE4 have drawn up real proposals, and while some are hopeful for them to move forward, others feel like they're being thrown under a bus.**

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## AREA FOR IMPROVEMENT: ACCORDING TO LANE4 ASSESSMENT

+ Bring in new restaurants that have a broad audience appeal like Stomping Grounds.

+ Opportunity to draw the greater Ames population.

+ Provide daily needs service like drug and grocery stores.

+ Utilize green space to hold public events such as speakers, art fairs, and concerts.

**M**ickey's Irish Pub was not filled with the usual smell of stale beer and the slurred pick-up lines. Instead, its dwellers asked questions and raised concerns about the project LANE4 Property Management and the City of Ames plans to wreck on Campustown in as little as a year. Business owners crowded onto the sticky floors of the popular bar on Welch Avenue in hopes to get their questions answered and an understanding on where the LANE4 wrecking ball would be making its impression. Tim Schrum, general manager of Mickey's, organized the meeting March 3 so Campustown business and property owners could ask questions about the future of their businesses, and they heard advice from a lawyer who was present.

The plan currently calls for major facelifts to most of the buildings along Lincoln Way, and most of the buildings facing Welch Avenue. Fighting Burrito, the business owned by City Councilman Matthew Goodman, would be left alone. The buildings behind it, however, such as the white one containing the Scallion and The Space (formerly known as the Ames Progressive) would be leveled and replaced with either parking or green space. A couple buildings on the east side of Welch may be knocked down too, for similar plans. India Palace, Joy's Mongolian Grill, and Domino's would be affected. And LANE4's proposals include bringing in new types of businesses, especially at the corners of Lincoln Way and Welch. They're looking for a pharmacy or small grocery store for one corner, a hotel and restaurant on the other.

Opposition began to build slowly, but once the Iowa State Daily ran a multipart series on the proposals in January, there was an outburst of disapproval from the Campustown community and students alike. Students were concerned about losing the venues they frequented and said it felt like they would be pushed out. A Facebook group started on the project features dozens of comments from students voicing outrage. But the man who started the group, Nitin Gadia, admits there is a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding.

But he says, "Most of the people I have talked to said that they do not agree with the way that things are moving forward." Gadia started a wiki about the issue as well, but holds off any judgment as he says he's waiting for more details to emerge.

Goodman wants to make it clear the Campustown project cannot simply be one entity marching in alone; there must be consensus. The property and business owners with a reasonably long-term lease need to be on board, as does the city, the university and LANE4. When he says long-term, he means those with month-to-month leases would be excluded because that's the point of short-term leases, where the property owners take the risk.

"We don't know what the result will be," Goodman says. "It's up to property owners, lease holders, and LANE4 to come up with a deal. If they can't then the project stalls, and maybe doesn't happen." LANE4 should be having conversations with all business and property owners about the value of what they have. Goodman says some may want out; some may not want to leave Campustown. "Those who don't, they need to help them relocate or help them reestablish." He hopes LANE4 will work with the businesses like Café Beaudelaire, Mayhem Comics, and Leedz Salon to keep them around.

This is what business owners have been complaining about; the only contact some have had was through news articles and letters sent to them. LANE4's only contact with Robert Josephson, owner of Mayhem Comics on Lincoln Way, was through form letters twice with offers that Josephson explains he wasn't interested in. Even months after the form letters were sent, Josephson has yet to see a face belonging to a member of LANE4. "They never once have come in here to find out about our opinion; they've never called us... [or] emailed us to find out our opinion." The closest Josephson has been to a member of the property group was during a focus group held in the spring of 2010.

If Josephson loses his business, he is optimistic about his financial future, but some

customers will find it a great disappointment. Michael Smith, senior in software engineering, knows Mayhem as a place to hang out on weekends instead of partaking in underage drinking. "When I was a freshman, I used to go there with my friends when we couldn't drink," he says. "We had fun, and it was safe."

Josephson just wishes the property group would have had a more cordial approach. "I don't think LANE4 is a bad guy ... they're a business," he says. "I think [they] have handled it badly."

**I**n the 1950s, Campustown was void of any bars. Liquor laws at the time dictated alcohol could not be sold that close to campus or where students lived. In their place was a pharmacy, hardware store, eateries, and small grocery stores—this was an era before the super markets like Hy-Vee and Walmart. Students who wanted to drink had to go to downtown Ames. There wasn't as much rental housing either, so students largely lived in the dorms, which were gender separated by building.

Some of the major changes came in the 1960s, when the university opened the dormitory towers. More pedestrian traffic flowed between the end of Welch and campus since CyRide was not running the way it does today. As liquor laws changed, as did social norms, and the rules requiring girls to be home in their dorm or sorority by 10 p.m. relaxed, drinking establishments began to open in Campustown. Hy-Vee only had a small store on the corner of Hyland Avenue and Lincoln Way.

Ron Hallenbeck, chair of the ISU Alumni Association, doesn't think Campustown now is much different than it was in 1970 when he was an undergraduate. In fact, he believes it to be a step up from back then. He points out coffee wasn't as big and there weren't as many services available on campus—so if a student needed to make copies, they wouldn't have anywhere on campus to do so. The school's dining options were more like a middle school cafeteria, and most were closed on Sundays.

Bars have come and gone. The Varsity

Theater, which moved from playing the popular mainstream movies to select niche movies, closed a couple years ago. Where Headliners now stands, it was once a pharmacy before becoming People's—one of the most popular bars in Ames when it was open. For years now, though, there have been discussions about the need to redevelop the area in terms of aesthetics and diversity of business.

"For an alum coming back there's a natural draw, I think, to Campustown. But quite frankly, some of the comments that I have heard from people not only from within Ames, but from people who come and visit," says Hallenbeck, who is also vice-president of the Ames Chamber of Commerce, "Campustown isn't a real draw anymore." Hallenbeck says returning alumni have changed and are not looking for a bar, tattoo parlor or copying center. "There's a level of disappointment that things haven't changed because there's been talk for a long time."

Alumni will also point out decades ago, tattoos were not yet popular. In some of the interviews in various newspapers thus far, multiple persons have alluded to the tattoo parlors in Campustown as part of the "blighted" degradation of the area.

"As a member of the Ames community, this is incredibly disheartening," Jason

Crimmins wrote in a letter to the editor in the Ames Tribune. Crimmins is the manager of Lasting Impressions Tattoo located in the heart of Campustown. Like others, his business faces the threat of being kicked out and their buildings destroyed due to the LANE4 redevelopment project.

However, the threat of being kicked out is not his greatest upset. When Crimmins wrote a letter to the Tribune it was the result of his distress by comments in an article in the Des Moines Register. That article reported LANE4's statement that the reason for the redevelopment in Campustown is due to the "businesses that appeal only to students, undesirable businesses such as tattoo parlors and piercing shops, and late-night noise."

To Crimmins, the statement is unfathomable. "I don't understand why [tattoo shops] are always blamed for the ills of Campustown," he says. "I take it exceptionally personal." Lane4 has deemed Campustown a "blight" area, which is what they explain to be the reason Ames came to them. According to Crimmins, his business is far from the cause of Campustown's woes.

The proximity of the bars and food vendors in relation to Campustown residency has been considered a fault in the appeal of Campustown as it causes the "late-night noise." However, some alumni are afraid what changing up the current businesses

will do to the appeal of Campustown. Tyler Beller graduated from Iowa State in 2004 and remembers his years as a resident of the Towers and his years living on Welch. Beller recalls how his social life thrived because of Campustown nightlife.

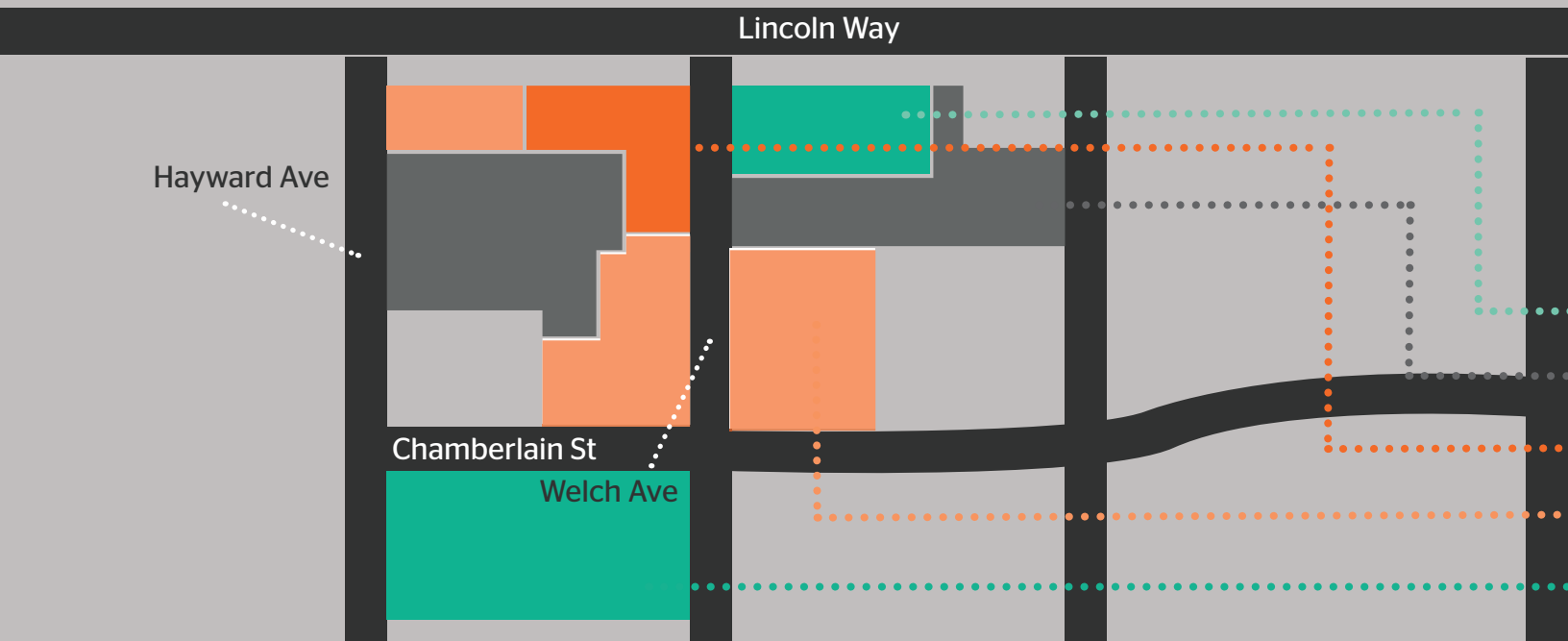
"The ability to walk to these gatherings of students and get home safely was crucial to the formation of my current network of friends," Beller says. "I worry about this proposed change and what it will do to the nightlife that is such a part of the college experience."

Adam Tow, a 2007 alumnus, agrees Campustown would lose its charm if the student nightlife dwindled. "Campustown [was] a place where I would see my friends at the crosswalks, know the street-food vendors," he says. "The beauty of Campustown is how it is a place of [students] and for students."

The business owners might not worry if not for a 2006 U.S. Supreme Court ruling allowing the use of eminent domain—a city forcing a property owner to sell—for economic development purposes. Iowa's law stipulates eminent domain may be used when located in a blighted area; defined as having unsafe and unsanitary conditions. Before this can happen though, there must be public hearings, and the City Council must approve eminent domain

***The plan currently calls for major facelifts to most of the buildings along Lincoln Way, and most of the buildings facing Welch Avenue.***

## INFORMATION ACCORDING TO LANE4'S PROPOSALS



purchases of more than one property in an area. And the term “blighted” is elastic, so with lawyers involved, it can easily become an expensive and drawn out situation.

Crimmins’ business serves thousands of people each year and is state licensed and inspected. Lasting Impressions does focus on the cleanliness of their store. Crimmins has been conducting his business in the student-populated area for nearly 15 years. In addition to serving students and others in the Ames community, Lasting Impressions has given back to the Ames community through charities and sponsorships.



**T**he city and the university came together in 2009 and spent \$30,000 on an architectural design of what Campustown might look like, city council member Matthew Goodman explains. After that they put a call out to developers to come forward with ideas about revitalizing the area, and the city and the university, but not City Council, selected LANE4—a development firm from Missouri. LANE4 has come back with proposals, which generally reflected what the University was seeking and discussed the phases of redevelopment.

Generally, Council wants a more diverse and successful mix of business, according to Goodman. He points to some of the area sometimes being “a little dirty,” which is not a sign of successful business. Most students would agree some of the bathrooms, for instance, are disgusting. Goodman says it’s a choice each business makes about bathrooms cleanliness, or anything else, and the old buildings and monetary limits.

The area needs to broaden the diversity of businesses, which would help all of the businesses, Goodman says. “You can’t buy a t-shirt in Campustown without Cy on it very easily, right? That’s what I mean.” He says having more choices is good for

***“I don’t think it’s correct to assume that whatever happens—if anything happens in Campustown—is not going to continue to provide services students want.”***

**—Warren Madden**

everyone. Hallenbeck dismisses the notion this is an effort to push out bars. “You see kids lined up at night to get in [to the bars],” he says, “but that’s because that’s the only thing there is to do.” Goodman adds that his businesses are largely dependent on the crowd from late night entertainment.

Hallenbeck elaborates that besides the alumni, Campustown is left out of the mix by visitors to Ames brought in by conventions, games and various events at the Iowa State Center. “I mean, let’s face it; if you’re having Special Olympics or something, you’re not sending a bunch of kids over there to do anything,” Hallenbeck says.

It’s not clear what new stores would open in the area. Hallenbeck and Goodman both account for the dense student population in the area; businesses searching for locations would likely not choose to ignore that market. So would a Christopher & Banks want to put a shop in Campustown? Probably not. A store like the Gap or Urban Outfitters? That’s certainly more likely. Any business is going to take into account the young, low-income college students filling Campustown and the dorms nearby. Goodman says it would be insane for a business not to take advantage of the potential market of ISU students, but that doesn’t mean a venue couldn’t cater to the Ames community as well.

“Any business or service is going to sit there and look at those customers (students) as being the closest and the best opportunity. I don’t think it’s correct to assume that whatever happens—if anything happens in Campustown—is not going to continue to provide services students want,” says Warren Madden, vice president of Business and Finance. He also points out the other captive audience is the roughly 6,000 faculty and staff.

**O**nly a couple months after Goodman started his burrito shop, the MU opened Burrito Works. This example of expanded food service on-campus, along with copying and printing, coffee and other services, doesn’t sit well with Ames business owners. Some complain it’s unfair to them to compete with the university, which does not pay property taxes and is closer than they could ever be to students. It’s also a problem for LANE4, which wants Iowa State to close the Memorial Union Hotel as they attempt to open a hotel in Campustown. The question is whether the MU’s hotel could coexist with a commercial hotel across the street, and Madden says although the MU’s hotel is running at a forth-eight percent occupancy rate, the University is reluctant at this point to accept this demand from the developer.

“Now it’s not a free-standing hotel,” Madden explains, saying it does pay its own way. The hotel desk, for example, serves more functions than simply a hotel front desk. “You get into conversations about if the hotel wasn’t there, would you still need to have that kind of service in the building and what other kinds of impact go on in the building?” Madden admits there is a legitimate basis for the concern of competition by the university, as things have changed from a time when the dining centers had a “one size fits all” model to an explosion in choices for food.

Madden doesn’t confirm whether there are any other services the university would need to consider eliminating. As university professor Steffen Schmidt wrote on the Register’s website, private businesses are often undermined by competition on campus. At one time, colleges needed to provide food services, as they were removed from any business district. Now, they often suppress the private business in the neighborhood.

Schmidt also pointed to a widespread concern among students that Campustown redevelopment could mean more of the “Potemkin Village fake-front strip malls” frequently built around Iowa. Students have told him they don’t want to see more skyscrapers like the towering apartments filled with party-central apartments, and Schmidt notes cities that have preserved artsy neighborhoods—such as Seattle and Minneapolis—rather than bulldozing them.

- ..... Grocery/Pharmacy
- ..... Parking
- ..... Retail Restaurant/ Hotel
- ..... Future Phase
- ..... Entertainment/Restaurant





However, he too admits there is a certain neglect in Campustown. "...I walked through Ames campus town and was shocked at the lack of self respect of many of the businesses," Schmidt wrote. "One corner bar has a pile of cigarette butts three inches thick in front of it. The next block the sidewalks were littered with cups, paper [and] trash."

Trip Ross, senior associate for LANE4, complained in an article in the Iowa State Daily he didn't know where people got the idea they would deliver "cookie cutter development with box stores and national retailers," or that Campustown is going to lose its character. "Really, we've never even said anything that would allude to that," Ross said.

"Absolutely, people are developing misconceptions," Goodman states. He doesn't simply blame media reports in Ames, but through conversations people have about what they've heard. Public forums have been held, however, critics complain LANE4 held them at times when few students could be there, like in the summer. Goodman can't remember whether it was mandated to have public forums, but says those are certainly vital to a successful project.

Gadia blames everyone, including himself, for the misunderstandings, and advocates for people not to wait for a public forum to be scheduled to voice their opinion. He began distributing fliers around Ames directing people to his wiki and to the Facebook group to encourage dialog. "If you do not make the time to organize you and your community, whether it is of businesspeople or residents, to both protect itself and prosper, you will suffer as an individual," he explains. "While on the one hand the people involved in the development should have involved everyone openly and directly, people should voluntarily join the conversation taking place."

Although Gadia admits he's had trouble even getting people to contribute to the Facebook page. "The dejection people face has perpetuated itself, and people don't realize that they do have a lot of power if they take an initiative," Gadia adds. "Whole revolutions are happening in the Arab world right now that are facilitated by Facebook, and we scoff at it as being 'trendy,' when it is a healthy and powerful tool for social change."

Hugo Kenemer, owner of Heroic Ink Tattoo in downtown Ames, is relieved to be out of the Campustown mess. The Asylum Tattoo moved from Welch to open Heroic Ink on Main Street. "I think we got out just in time," Kenemer laughs. Although he still

feels for the business owners he used work with. Because Crimmins does not own the building his business runs in, he feels his voice is easily disregarded. "I don't have a dog in this fight," he explains. "Nobody cares what I think and I don't blame them ... I just feel like we're being thrown under the bus here." After numerous attempts to contact LANE4, no one from the group could be reached for comment.



**H**allenbeck repeatedly refers to The Café in Somerset, in the northern part of Ames, as an example of how the economic development could happen. What he says could be key is finding a magnet: a venue that would attract people to the area, spur other businesses to locate in Campustown and even persuade redevelopment of rental housing. He's not sure whether that needs to be an electronics store, music shop, restaurant or clothier. "But someone, you know, who could cater to having that [student] population so close," he goes on. "I am a true believer that if you get something there to begin with, that it just begins expanding out."

Hallenbeck wants to see a clothier popular with college students, something students like and parents would purchase for their college students. Restaurants have also been tossed around, and Madden says Government of the Student Body leaders have thrown out suggestions like Denny's, Village Inn, T.G.I.Friday's, or a similar kind of place in Campustown. "Can we put something like that together in Campustown and can we make the economics work?" Madden poses. "That's what we're in conversation with LANE4 about right now." The economic model, he says, must work for everyone; customers, students and staff, business and property owners, the city and the university, as well as LANE4.

Many students have questioned why the focus has been on existing businesses, and not the substandard housing students rent as dirty party houses. Goodman says it's because that's just not the task the city gave to LANE4; they told them to focus on the existing commercial property area. Hallenbeck suggests once the redevelopment was taking off, someone may have interest in either renovating the housing or replacing it with commercial businesses.

There's also the desire to create an attractive "front door" to Campustown at the corner of Lincoln Way and Welch Avenue. LANE4 has the vision of placing a hotel and restaurant on one corner, a grocery store on the other. Having a viable Campustown

is important to the university in terms of recruiting faculty as well as students.

If either buildings are renovated or demand to be located in Campustown goes up, rent would likely go up as well, though. Meaning some business owners may not be able to afford to stay in the area. Hallenbeck hopes this isn't so; if an increase in customers accompanies the redevelopment, it could offset any need for price increases. So in that case, at least the customers—mostly being students—wouldn't suffer as much.

Because of LANE4's proposals, GSB has already voted to abandon the controversial Varsity Theater project, and they tapped into the capital projects account during regular allocations this semester. However, ISU President Gregory Geoffroy stating the University wouldn't rent part of the theater for classroom space also weighed into the decision. Construction has already begun on a transit hub and parking garage in Lot 60. This project is separate from the Campustown project, and is paid for by a federal government grant. In the end, it will include an increase in parking spots and a spot for regional buses to load and unload, as well as some office space.

"I appreciate the comments that come from the students, but ya know, let's face it; they're going to become alumni, they're going to come back. And I've seen it time and time again, you change," Hallenbeck states. He emphasizes people who are several years removed from college have a realization of how much younger the students are who crowd into the cheap bars every night, but those alumni still want to stop by Welch Avenue.

"I really can't speak for LANE4, and I really can't speak for the City," Goodman cautions. "But I firmly believe this City Council respects existing business owners and investors in Campustown. Because of that respect, their use of that tool (eminent domain) is unlikely." Goodman says he thinks what the city wants is for LANE4 to do what they were charged to do, which is to bring all parties together as willing partners.

Goodman says he isn't for or against the project at this point. He wants to ensure success, to ensure Campustown businesses and tenants are respected, but even once agreements are reached, the project needs to be financed. This is a whole new set of conversations as LANE4 has not yet had, and would be why they have not attempted to buy any property. When any actual buildings would be changed is also unknown. The first phase would be the east corner of Welch Avenue and Lincoln Way.

Things are unclear, and the process would be long for this type of project. However,

## LANE4'S ASSESSMENT OF CAMPUSTOWN


### Strengths

### VS

### Weaknesses

- + Unique Businesses
- + Late Night Dining and Entertainment
- + Reduces Drunk Driving
- + Student Housing
- + Student Accessibility
- + 24/7 Printing
- (Copyworks)

- Lack of Cleanliness and Maintenance
- Only Appealing to Students
- Unappealing tattoo and piercing shops
- Late Night Noise

Madden believes there are a number of factors coming together to make right now the best chance for this to move forward, better than he's seen in forty years, even if there are still a number of hurdles ahead. 

*"...I just feel like we're being thrown under the bus here."*

*-Jason Crimmins*

